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AUTHOR Rintell, Ellen M.; Pierce, Michelle
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the experiences of participants in Project PET (Para-Educators to Teachers), a Title VII program aimed at increasing the number of qualified and certified teachers in communities surrounding a northeastern U.S. city that is home to immigrants and refugees from a wide array of Spanish-speaking countries. Through Project PET, Latina paraprofessionals receive tuition toward a bachelor's degree at a local college, assistance in seeking teacher licensure, and additional support from family and staff. Data from anecdotal records, surveys, and interviews indicated that participants had a variety of types of life experiences and knowledge (e.g., previous teacher training, college in their home country, and work in schools after moving to the United States). Participants viewed previous educational experiences and knowledge of bilingual students' cultural backgrounds as strengths. Many commented that the project's financial support was the only way they could pursue teacher licensure. Participants maintained high grade point averages. Key to participants' success were family members and the Project PET cohort. Challenges included the English language, adjustment to U.S. higher education culture, and logistics (e.g., time management and child care). (Contains 20 references.) (SM)

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Becoming Maestra:
Latina Paraprofessionals as Teacher Candidates in Bilingual Education

Ellen M. Rintell, Ed.D.
Salem State College

Michelle Pierce, Ed.D.
Salem State College

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The shortage of new teachers continues to be a top-priority issue on education agendas nationwide, with particular emphasis on the serious gap between the number of minority students in U.S. schools and the number of minority teachers to serve them. The need for more diversity in the teaching profession is rooted in the ideal that teachers who share the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of their students will help to "provide insights that might otherwise remain hidden" (Delpit, 1995, p. 181). The news is not promising, however, when it comes to the recruitment of minority teachers in the new millennium. In a review of demographic data from Census 2000, Hodgkinson reports that "as student enrollments become increasingly racially diverse, the teaching force is actually becoming increasingly White, due mainly to the striking decline in Black, Hispanic, and Asian enrollments in teacher education programs since 1990" (2002, p. 104).

The decline in the number of Hispanic teachers is especially disconcerting because it is estimated that approximately 40% of the U.S. population growth over the next 20 years will be Hispanic (Hodgkinson, 2002, p. 103). The number of English language learners who will require bilingual education over the next several decades will therefore be substantial. As a result, in areas where the bilingual and bicultural population is growing rapidly, teacher

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educators have begun to seek new and creative ways to recruit and train qualified teachers for culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Some have exposed U.S.-born teachers to instructional practices in other cultures through travel to other countries (Clark & Flores, 1997). Others have recognized that we need not venture far to find a rich and abundant source of knowledge about learning styles and classroom practice in other cultures; a valuable resource can be found among the large number of U.S. immigrants who share the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds as many of our P-12 students.

An increasingly popular approach to easing the teacher shortage in bilingual communities is the training of immigrants who have a background in education in their native countries or who have served as paraprofessionals (assistants to teachers) in U.S. schools. "In many ways, para-educators have the potential to become the ideal teachers of LEP students. As native speakers of the students' languages [they] have the experience of acquiring English as a second language, and they are sensitive to differing cultural values and attitudes" (Genzuk, Lavadenz, & Krashen, 1994).

Several reports from the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) described the efforts of Project Alianza to certify bilingual aides and normalistas (teachers trained in Mexico) as bilingual education teachers in the United States. The reports focus on the recruitment of participants, university admissions procedures, support systems for students, and the content of teacher preparation programs (Cantu, 1999; Cortez, 2000; Supik, 1999). Recent research on Project Alianza has also compared the models of teacher preparation used in Mexico and the United States (Petrovic, Orozco, González, & Díaz de Cossío, 1999). For example, while normalistas may have less background in the liberal arts than the typical U.S. teacher candidate, they are likely to have completed more education

course work and have more professional experience working in classrooms. However, this experience may not include specific training in bilingual education; thus, along with assistance in learning the English language, normalistas who wish to teach in the U.S. may also need courses on instructional methods for bilingual education.

Additional research on minority paraprofessionals includes Becket's investigation of the Latino Teachers Project (LTP) at the University of Southern California and the Navajo Nation Teacher Preparation Program at Fort Lewis College in Colorado (1998). Specifically, Becket sought to determine how these two programs, both aimed at preparing and certifying paraeducators, differed from traditional teacher preparation programs. Findings revealed that participants' success was in part linked to their ability to connect coursework to their ongoing experiences in classrooms and to the programs' value added model, which "includes elements that add value to the program such as cooperative learning, cohorts, special sessions and interventions, and careful counseling and nurturing from program administrators and mentors" (Becket, 1998, p. 203).

While efforts at recruiting Hispanics and other minorities into the teaching profession are progressing, it is important to note a number of obstacles that minorities face when pursuing teacher licensure. First, many minority teacher candidates, particularly paraprofessionals, are non-traditional students. A review of research on non-traditional teacher candidates indicates that they may have more financial concerns and feel isolated in the college setting (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998). Family commitments and transportation issues may pose logistical problems as well (Manos & Kasambira, 1998).

For Latino/a teacher candidates, specifically, there may be additional obstacles to entering the teaching profession. There is evidence to suggest that high-stakes testing in

English creates barriers for prospective bilingual education teachers (Flores & Clark, 1997; Valencia & Aburto, 1991). Furthermore, Padilla has noted that Latino/a students and other minorities "are often viewed by professors and white students alike as academically unprepared and inferior, and as receiving an undeserved 'free ride'" (1997, p. 12). Based on a review of 36 studies on minorities in teacher credential programs, Quiocho and Rios (2000) summarized the issues facing minority students and highlighted those which are particular to the pool of Hispanic teacher candidates:

> Latinos experience many of the same difficulties that all ethnic minorities face when pursuing teaching as a career: testing biases, negative perceptions of the teaching profession, teacher education curriculums that are unresponsive to their cultural capital or that fail to facilitate development of a culturally responsive pedagogy, and pressure in field-based experiences to conform to traditional approaches to teaching. But we also see important differences: the differing ways in which people respond to pressures to assimilate, the honor and status of teachers in the Latino culture, the opportunity to use teaching to give back to the community, the sensitive nature of "voice," the role of varying degrees of bilingualism and immigration statuses, and the especially critical need to create community. (p. 523)

On the one hand, these findings provide us with knowledge of various key issues in minority teacher education; on the other, they signal the need and opportunity for continued investigation. Minority teacher candidates are far more likely to break down barriers if researchers assess the needs of minority teacher candidates and examine the features of alternative certification programs (Bainer, 1993; Quiocho & Rios, 2000; Zapata, 1988).

To date, however, we have little information about the journeys of minority paraprofessionals as they travel the long road toward teacher licensure in a new culture. This study investigates the experiences of participants in Project PET (Para-Educators to Teachers), a Title VII program aimed at increasing the number of qualified and certified teachers in communities surrounding a northeastern U.S. city that is home to immigrants and refugees from the wide array of Spanish-speaking countries across Central and South America and the Caribbean. Through Project PET, a five-year effort funded by the United States Department of Education, Latina paraprofessionals receive tuition toward the bachelor's degree at a local college, assistance in seeking teacher licensure, and additional support from faculty and staff. In order to inform future endeavors of a similar nature, we were particularly interested in learning about the backgrounds of Project PET participants and what their experiences are as students in the program. The following questions guided the investigation:

1) What knowledge and life experiences did participants bring with them into the program?
2) What are participants' experiences as candidates for teacher licensure? Namely, a) what challenges have they faced, and b) what has helped them to succeed?
3) How has the higher education institution worked a) to meet participants' needs and b) to benefit from their "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992)?

Methodology

Context

The study was conducted at a publicly funded institution of higher learning located 20 miles north of a northeastern U.S. city. The college serves more than 8,400 part-time and

full-time students. It is in close proximity to the communities in which local school districts employ the participants as paraprofessionals. Across these communities, 6,874 students have been identified as "Limited English Proficient." Approximately one quarter of the teachers serving these children are not licensed and are working on waivers.

Participants

Participants in the study were 15 Latina paraprofessionals who were admitted to Project PET between October of 1999 and July of 2000. Participants came to the northeastern United States from Argentina, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela. All completed at least the equivalent of a U.S. high school diploma in their native countries. Participants' ages ranged from 30 to 55, and most were married and/or had children at home during the course of the study.

Data Collection

Data collection was ongoing throughout the first two years of the grant-funded project, which began in October of 1999. The program co-directors and bi-weekly seminar leader kept anecdotal records of participants' achievements, questions, and areas of concern, both in relation to academic work and personal adjustment to the higher education environment. The seminar leader was also interviewed to obtain information about participants' successes and challenges. Participants completed a survey that asked for background information, a report on academic progress, and licensure status. Further information on academic progress was also obtained from student records and faculty evaluations. Individual participants were interviewed about their knowledge and experiences prior to entering the program, their current experiences as students, and specific experiences in the higher education environment.

Analysis

Surveys and transcripts of individual interviews were coded for information pertaining to the knowledge and life experiences participants brought with them into the program. Surveys, student records, and faculty evaluations provided both qualitative and quantitative descriptive data on participants' experiences as candidates for teacher licensure. Coding and analysis of anecdotal records and interview transcripts with attention to participants' challenges and successes further enhanced this description. Finally, anecdotal records and interview transcripts were coded with attention to the ways in which the higher education institution has worked to assist and benefit from Project PET participants. Triangulation of data from the multiple sources provided a comprehensive view of Latina paraprofessionals' experiences as teacher candidates in bilingual education and verified themes in the data.

Results

Findings revealed a variety of knowledge and life experiences among Project Pet participants. Some had no college experience in their native countries; others had 2-3 years of college and/or work experience in areas such as accounting and social services; and some had previous teacher training and experience in their homelands. Jasmin's experience, as she describes it, is typical of participants who were teachers in their native countries. She explains:

> I came from Guatemala nine years ago, and I was teaching for thirteen years there, and we came to this country and one of my…what I feel that I feel comfortable to do is teaching, and I was wishing to do that here…When I came here, the W._____ school was across the street. Everyday I said to God, please, let me work in this school. Every single day I said that. One of my sons told me, "Mommy, why are you talking out the window?" I said, "I want to work in this school."

Another participant, Margarita, is typical of participants who began working in schools after moving to the United States, often to help their own children in school or to be near them. Margarita remarks:

> But then I married, and my husband asked me if I knew what I was signing for my daughter. And he bought me a book and then I start to study about school, and that is why I ended up into the school…At the beginning it [working at the school] was because of her problems, and then because I was thinking about many students like her that maybe the parents…they don't know, like I didn't know.

While participants viewed previous educational experiences as assets, they also saw their knowledge of bilingual students' cultural backgrounds as a strength: "I have the culture – I come from the same setting that they come from, the language, having good relations to the parents," says Miriam. Elena, a Latina ESL teacher who leads the Project PET bi-weekly support seminar, agrees that participants' knowledge of another culture and their high level of motivation are important strengths. Elena states:

> I think that there was a sense of enthusiasm and anxiously looking forward to being able to share that [their experiences using their second language to learn academic material] with their students. And they certainly are in a much better position to work with kids who have the same type of background because they've been there, they've done it, and they've gotten the tee-shirt for it. They are success stories, they're just amazing people. I can never, when I would leave… I just don't have enough words to think about how amazing they are. (She pauses and waits for control of her voice with tears coming as she speaks.) I get very emotional.

Some participants waited for a green card or worked in factories before being able to work as paraprofessionals in the public school system, and many commented that pursuing teacher licensure was only possible financially with help from the grant. Sandra remarks:

> I always wanted to study, but we couldn't…I mean by means of money, we couldn't do it. So, my husband was really supportive; he said, this is the opportunity, this is a scholarship - it was the grant - so you can do it. So I applied. I was always wanting to finish my school here, because I was always a teacher. I feel as a teacher, but here they don't

> consider me as a teacher, and I've been working as a teacher for many years in South America…being a teacher's assistant here is great, but I always wanted to be a teacher here, too, and to show my own kids that we have to finish something that we started. It's like an example for them, not to quit. Not to give up, because…and I think I'm capable to do it.

Indeed, participants are capable of doing it. The average grade point average (GPA) of the Project PET participants as of May 2001 was 3.27, higher than the 2.75 required for Educational Studies majors. Faculty have, for the most part, responded positively to students' academic work. Susana comments:

> I think they [the professors] respect us because we come from another background. I think they notice that we know… In history, too, one of the teachers says, he talked about a book. And he said to the American students, shame on you. Because all these people who came from another country, who went to high school in another country, they have already read it...We read a lot of the traditional classics. I don't think they do that here [in high school]… Sometimes the young kids say, "all I need is a C." It's a good thing that the teacher didn't hear them say that because they would be so depressed!

Nonetheless, participants did cite the English language as a source of concern. Miriam remarks:

> I think my concerns were the language, the expression…every bilingual person I know, that was their concern, the scary part…how am I going to sound? I know I have the knowledge, but transferring that knowledge, that Spanish to the English, was sometimes hard for me.

Elena, the seminar instructor, also notes:

> I think that probably the greatest challenge was just, for a lot of them, just negotiating the English language because there were various stages of acquiring the language and becoming comfortable in it and having to participate in a classroom situation, and only depend on their English, and that was their greatest challenge. And even if they did it beautifully, they never thought it was good enough. So they were very, very hard on themselves.

Also challenging was the adjustment to U.S. higher education culture – the admissions process, the Registrar, the paperwork – all of which at times seemed daunting and foreign. "In the

beginning, you go a little blind. You get letters telling you to go to different offices…you don't really understand how the system works because it's completely different from where you are coming from," remarks Sandra.

Logistical issues of time management, commuting, and childcare were consistently mentioned as concerns. When asked what the hardest part of the program is, Susana answered:

> Driving. The commuting part is hard. The difficult part for me was to leave [on time from her job at school] and the commute thing, because I live so far, but that's OK; I don't complain… The thing is that we're always in a rush. I would love to stay there and talk, but there's no time. I have to go home and study or whatever. Maybe if I lived closer that would help, but I always think one hour back and one hour going.

Michelle, one of the project directors, notes that one setback in the program is that "several students have had to stop taking classes for a semester due to pregnancy, and others have done so to care for ailing parents. There's pressure to have people finish in the time period covered by the grant, but life doesn't always cooperate!"

Key to participants' success were two groups of people: family and the Project PET cohort. Participants' children were generally supportive, and parents felt less guilty about leaving children to attend class because of the importance of being a role model: "I want to be an example for them. Not to quit or give up…If Mommy can do it even though she is older, then they can do it now."

Spouses and extended family were often helpful as cooks and caregivers to children, and sometimes as proofreaders and study helpers. Margarita speaks affectionately about her husband's support:

> Oh he's so proud of me. He really is, and he supports me a hundred percent. Without him I can never do that. Many times, a lot of the times, I go and don't do nothing at home, so he goes and cooks, he does…after all day of work he goes and cooks, and he helps me

> cleaning and all that stuff. Without him I wouldn't be able to do. So he's proud and he pushes me.

Miriam gains household support from her mother and her children. Her husband also wants her to do well and intends, at least, to help. She remarks:

> My mother and my husband encouraged me to do this. My husband said he'd take care of the kids, but he doesn't do that. But my mother does and my aunt, too. They'll do anything for me to continue. They want me to finish. They keep encouraging me… They [the children] have homework, and I have to help them. When I get here [home] it's go, go…

Organizing time to carry out all the participants' home and work responsibilities is a challenge for all of the participants. Jasmin has worked it out in her life:

> Well, let me say that I'm really a busy woman, because after my college, I'm working with the community. In C_____, I'm working in the church; now I'm teaching a GED [class]…My days start at 5:00 in the morning, every single day, doesn't matter if it is a weekend, or the week, and I have two hours every day to study, aah, it's from 6 o'clock to 8 o'clock at night, after dinner, when I finish. Six to eight. This is my, my husband say, this is my, how you say? My *private*, my *private* time. I don't receive any calls, nothing. This is my time to study. If I don't have to study, I need to read. Because this is the…I think is the better way to better my vocabulary, that's what I'm doing. Every single day, two hours. And on Mondays is the only day that I read one hour, because the other hour I usually take to make research of something, but only study. …I'm very organized, 'cause you know, if you don't save your time… this is my philosophy. I save my time, and my time helps me. You know? The time saves me.

Participants also noted the inspiration found in social connections with fellow Project PET participants. "[The best thing] is to know people, the same, with the same goals as I do…they want to prove themselves and be a success," says Sandra. Diana also tells us that she finds the "family" created in the program to be her greatest support.

> The best part is becoming friends with the other people in the group —sometimes we drive here together. We study together. We are really good friends. Last Saturday we

> went to the library and studied there all day. Then afterward we went to a Chinese restaurant. It was fun…Once I locked my keys in the car, and my purse was in the car. I had no phone, no money. But I got the campus policeman to come to try to open up the car. He couldn't do it, and he said I had to call a tow truck to take my car to a garage to work on it. But I didn't have any money. So I ran inside the building. This building. A group of them (Project PET participants) were in the hall, waiting for the time to go to class. So I ran in, and asked everyone who could give me some money. Everyone dug out some money. Five dollars from this one, one dollar from that one, until I had enough money to take care of the car. If I didn't have this group, that could never have happened. We really help each other.

The bi-weekly support seminar led by Elena was one of the steps taken at the college to assist Project PET participants, with the hope that students would have a place to share successes and concerns. Griselda states:

> We were very close and [Elena] is a nice person. I love her very much, and she was willing to help us in anything we need. And I remember she gave us a course that provide us all the different techniques, how you study, how you can succeed in the college, and all this kind of things, and that was very helpful, And, we tend…we were very close to the people who took ESL…we were very close.

The ESL class that Griselda mentions is one that was organized for Project PET participants to provide support during their first two years. Given the statewide teacher testing requirements, a review of test-taking strategies in English also became necessary. Ellen, one of the project directors, comments:

> One student has come to me very upset that she failed the literacy and communication part of the teacher test, saying it was the second time she had failed. She worried that she would lose time until she could pass it and continue on with course work in order to graduate; but most importantly, she is teaching on a waiver and won't be a permanent teacher until she passes the test. She could even lose her job. Two other students have failed by three points or less, so I'm confident that they will eventually pass. Since I have been so concerned about it, I set up a class to prepare for it, with ESL students in mind. There are already workshops at the college to prepare students to take the test, but I want the students in our program to get a really thorough review of grammar, and vocabulary development, and essay writing, not only so that they will pass, but so that they will also feel confident. I also feel that the class may serve as the extra ESL support that some students still need to do well in their courses.

There is also ongoing discussion about how the college can help with childcare issues and how best to train faculty in strategies for assisting English language learners in the college classroom. Furthermore, in an effort to benefit from participants' knowledge of the bicultural/bilingual experience, several faculty members wish to create a program in which Project PET participants serve as mentors for mainstream undergraduate students who are preparing to work in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

Discussion

Latina paraprofessionals in the current study brought with them a wide array of background experiences that enable them to understand the needs and concerns of bilingual students. Not only do participants share P-12 students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds; they also share many of the same challenges, such as high-stakes testing in their second language and the development of academic language proficiency in English. Fortunately, Project PET participants were helped by support systems that address the issue of high-stakes testing in their non-native language. The need for this support, however, highlights once again the barriers that such testing creates for prospective bilingual education teachers (Flores & Clark, 1997).

Project PET participants are also assisted in dealing with such challenges by two very important families – the one at home and the one created with members of the project cohort. The Latino concept of family and the particularly high value placed on it has been widely discussed as a key aspect of the culture and has been related to Latino children's education, most often with respect to the collectivism it represents and its role in what is believed to be a typical learning style of Latino students. Teachers of Latino students are encouraged to be cognizant of this and to use this knowledge to students' advantage by emphasizing

collaborative work, group loyalty, and making the class like a family, rather than to emphasize individual differences and competition (Vasquez, 1998). In the discourse of the Latina paraprofessionals who were informants in the current study, we note that the theme of the importance of family is confirmed and reconfirmed.

Findings in the current study also confirm many of the results in previous studies on non-traditional students as candidates for teacher licensure (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998; Manos & Kasambira, 1998). Because participants in Project PET face the challenge of returning to school later in life and managing a household and family along with their schoolwork, issues of finances, childcare, time management, and commuting become paramount. Of note in the current study is the observation that participants were freed of some financial burdens because they received tuition and book stipends through a grant. Whenever possible, programs aimed at assisting paraprofessionals should seek funding to cover these expenses in order to alleviate the stress associated with some of these obstacles.

It is interesting to note, however, that in spite of receiving financial assistance, there was no evidence to suggest that Latina paraprofessionals in the current study were viewed negatively by faculty or students, or that they were seen, as Padilla (1998) indicated they can be, as getting an undeserved free ride. On the contrary, several students appeared to be more well-prepared by high school experiences than did the mainstream American students with whom they now share the college classroom. Participants were able to persevere and succeed, exemplifying the qualities of "resilience and self-confidence combined with political astuteness" that are to be found in many successful bilingual educators (Clark & Milk, 1983, p. 43). Among Project PET participants, the belief that one "just has to do it" supersedes any feelings of insecurity and uncertainty around, for example, the use of English

for assignments and class discussion. There is evidence of a serious work ethic, appreciation for education, and strong academic performance among Project PET participants, proving that Latina paraprofessionals are capable of exceeding the expectations set for mainstream students, enriching the college classroom environment, and serving as role models for both younger students and other minority students.

Also of relevance are the participants' positive attitudes toward education as a profession. Quiocho and Rios (2000) cited negative perceptions about the teaching profession as a potential problem in recruiting minority teacher candidates, particularly as they begin to experience greater academic achievement and see doors opening in more lucrative professions. An advantage to training Latina paraprofessionals is that they are already committed to the field of education, know that they find it rewarding, and see "becoming maestra" as a step up and forward on a journey that has already begun.

Implications

The significance of this study is most apparent with regard to supporting and assisting those who are planning future projects of a similar nature. The dissemination of these results will help teacher educators to make informed decisions when implementing programs that seek to train and certify immigrants and paraprofessionals as bilingual educators. An especially valuable lesson for us was the need for more emphasis on making all college faculty aware of participants' background experiences and their potential to be resources in the college classroom. While participants felt respected by faculty and students, their funds of knowledge about minority students' perspectives and learning styles across cultures remained largely untapped. Moreover, paraprofessionals should also be viewed as resources

in education classes, where they could provide valuable insights into the daily lives of teachers in the public schools.

While this study focused on the experiences of Latina paraprofessionals as teacher candidates in bilingual education, it has, in the broadest sense, significance for anyone wishing to recruit and retain minority students of all ages and backgrounds. In a compelling commentary on minority students in higher education, Cuello (1997) notes:

> As a consequence of the accelerated democratic and technological changes taking place in our society, it has become a general public expectation that all high school students have the opportunity to go to college. However, caught on the shifting ground in the transition between old and new social paradigms, the schools that channel students to our universities have not been fully able to adjust for the task of preparing massive numbers of students for the new expectations. Families, communities, governments, and the general public – major players in the capacity to adjust to the new challenges – are, themselves, caught in comparable transitions. Large numbers of students are thus coming to the university unconditioned for what they are about to face. Many of those who do survive an experience that often amounts to cultural shock often suffer losses in resources, time, academic performance, and self-esteem. (on-line)

In this time of transition, it is more critical than ever that teacher educators and researchers give top priority to discussions about changes in high-stakes testing, admissions procedures, student support systems, and the academic culture of higher education for minority students.

Only then will a college education and a professional career be real possibilities for *all* students in the United States.

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